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TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF PTER PHUM CO  
SUBJECT: U PARTY MOVES AHEAD ON URIBE REELECTION--BUT ALSO  
PREPARES A "PLAN B"

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer  
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) President Uribe's allies remain focused on changing the Constitution to allow the president to run for a third term, but U party President Restrepo told us former-Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos would be the party's candidate if Uribe does not run. The bill to change the Constitution to allow for reelection has passed in Congress, but the House and Senate need to reconcile bills which allow for reelection in 2010 or 2014. Restrepo said Santos is highly prepared to be president, and voiced skepticism that a unified Uribista candidate would emerge. He told us rebuilding the U Party--a mix of reformers and old-time-Liberal clientalists--was difficult, but said he is working on a new party platform that would benefit either Uribe or Santos. End summary.

PLAN A: REELECTION

¶2. (C) President Alvaro Uribe's closest allies remain convinced that he will run again for president, and are continuing the effort to change the Constitution to allow him to do so. The bill approving the Constitutional reform passed all four needed votes in Congress and awaits reconciliation in House-Senate Conference Committee. Senate President Hernan Andrade (Conservative) told us he will push for language in the Senate version of the bill which explicitly allows for immediate reelection in 2010. Still, House President German Varon (Cambio Radical) favors the House version allowing for reelection in 2014. Varon told us he will attempt to maintain the House language.

¶3. (C) Conservative Party leader Senator Efrain Cepeda said Andrade is considering a compromise with Varon that would move the House version forward in the expectation that the Constitutional Court could use its mandatory review of the proposal to interpret the language to allow for immediate reelection. Still, Cepeda said Uribe coalition members of Congress fear a new preliminary Supreme Court investigation against coalition members that voted for the reelection bill. Cepeda said the Supreme Court's new investigation--and its sentencing of two former representatives to long prison terms for bribery during the first Uribe reelection effort (all in the same week as Conference Committee was to meet)--is a "message from the Supreme Court" against reelection.

¶4. (C) Once the reelection bill emerges from Conference

Committee, it will be reviewed by the Constitutional Court. Constitutional Court Magistrate and former Uribe advisor Mauricio Gonzalez told us the referendum bill would likely get through the Court, but added that Court members remain wary of handling too much political baggage in the vote--including having to decide the 2010 versus 2014 question. If approved, the reform would then move to a national referendum which would require a majority favorable vote with a minimum 25% turnout of registered votes (approximately 7.2 million) to be approved.

**15.** (SBU) Gallup pollster Jorge Londono told us that if the reelection referendum were held now, Uribe would more than meet the 25% of registered voter threshold. More than 50% of those polled said they would participate in the referendum and more than 80% of those said they would vote yes. These numbers reflect many voters' view of the referendum as a plebiscite on Uribe's performance. He said Uribe's enduring popularity is based on the threat posed by FARC, Chavez, and Correa, but said the president remains vulnerable over the economy and corruption. He predicted that Colombia's continuing economic downturn could reduce Uribe's overall approval rating to the mid 50s by early next year, putting the referendum's result in doubt if it slips into late 2009 or early 2010.

#### PLAN B

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**16.** (C) U Party President Luis Carlos Restrepo told us President Uribe and former Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos do not trust each other. Still, if Uribe does not run again, the U Party's candidate will be Santos. The former

MOD is the best-prepared candidate, although he lacks charisma and Uribe's common touch. Restrepo said Santos will support the reelection effort, while quietly preparing his possible campaign in the event that Uribe does not run. Despite calls from Uribe coalition party leaders for a unified Uribista candidate, Restrepo doubts a unified candidate will emerge due to the different parties' ambitions and candidates' egos. He said a unified candidate would only be possible if Uribe forced the various party leaders together.

#### U PARTY REFORM IS "HARD"

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**17.** (C) Restrepo said that reorganizing the U Party--which remains a mix of modern candidates attractive to independent voters and former-Liberal Party regional "caudillos"--was hard. The para-political scandal has hurt the Party (with 14 U Party Congressmen implicated), and the departure of Party dissidents Marta Lucia Ramirez and Gina Parody was also damaging. He said the key is to achieve the right blend of independents and traditional, clientalist political leaders. Restrepo noted that the current political reform bill pending in Congress, which would allow congressmen to change parties during a six month period, is important to the U Party because he expects to pick up Uribe allies from the Liberals, Cambio Radical, and some smaller parties if it passes.

#### U PARTY'S EMERGING PLATFORM

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**18.** (C) Restrepo said he is also trying to build a broad U Party political program which would center on four issues: 1) the creation of a peace office which would manage social programs to incorporate Colombia's two million peasants into the political and economic mainstream; 2) an anti-corruption initiative; 3) the removal of the National Police from the Ministry of Defense, to place it in a new Justice Ministry. (This would involve redefining the CNP's and military's respective roles, as well as budget adjustments); and, 4) redesigning social programs such as Families In Action to make them sustainable. These elements could reinforce Uribe's popularity if he runs again, and represent the basis of a new platform for Santos if Uribe does not do so.

**19.** (U) We will report septel on the U Party's efforts to forge a possible 2010 presidential coalition both within the

established Uribista coalition, and with independents.  
Brownfield